

# **Working in the Time of COVID-19 Oral History Project**

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**Derik Nelson**

**Singer-Songwriter and Educator**

**Member, SAG/AFTRA and American Federation of Musicians**

**Interviewee:** Derik Nelson

**Interviewers:** Brad Schrandt

**Subjects:** COVID-19, pandemic, musical work, touring musician, Hollywood, band, venue, live music, songwriting, work from home, live stream, tickets, play music, trailer, music recording, collaboration online

**Location:** Olympia, Washington via Zoom

**Date:** June 4, 2020

**Interview Length:** 01:02:25

**File Name:** NelsonDerik\_2020\_C19\_Video\_Interview\_Completed.mp4

BRAD SCHRANDT 00:00:17: Alright. Hello everybody. My name is Brad Schrandt and today is June 4, 2020, and I am contacting you via Zoom from Olympia, Washington. Today I am meeting with musician extraordinaire, Derik Nelson. Derik, where are you at?

DERIK NELSON 00:00:33: I am actually, coincidentally, also in Olympia, Washington. We got some hometown love here.

BRAD 00:00:41: Nice. That's awesome. Are you just up visiting, or are you actually hunkered down here for a little while?

DERIK 00:00:45: No, I'm hunkered down here. I moved back here about three and a half years ago from LA to start a touring project. My family's based up here, so it made sense to move my company and work from here in Olympia. I love it up here.

BRAD 00:01:02: Nice. Me too. Great city. Sweet. So, basically, today we're going to be talking about being a musician, being a musician pre COVID-19, what you're currently doing, and what you think the music scene is gonna be like or things that we can maybe expect post COVID-19. We're making an oral history for the future ages to look back and be able to hear what—what musicians that were doing. So, tell me a little bit about yourself. Just tell me when and what got you into music.

DERIK 00:01:35: I have always loved music. I was always singing and wanting to be on stage as a—as a little kid, as early as seven or eight years old. I started playing saxophone in fifth grade, took private lessons with none other than Mr. Brad Schrandt. (*Brad laughs*) And that really opened up a new—a new layer of music for me, and, especially early on, in those formative years, that was really pivotal. The thing was I loved playing saxophone, but I also love to sing and you can't do both at once. So I started—I started playing guitar and was self taught on guitar. That led to piano. I was self-taught on piano and guitar and started trying to wrap my ears and hands and body around as many instruments as I could as my love for music grew. By the time I was fourteen, I—for my fourteenth birthday my parents got me an all-in-one sixteen track digital recorder.

BRAD 00:02:41: Oooh, nice.

DERIK 00:02:42: It came with a CD burner in it so you could mix your entire song and then burn it straight to CD. That was like—that was my world. Some kids would come home and play Nintendo and play video games and watch TV. I came home from school and disappeared into my headphones trying to figure out how I could layer all of these different sounds that were in my head on top of themselves. That was like—that was my thing. That is what made me tick.

BRAD 00:03:13: Oh, right on. That's awesome.

DERIK 00:03:15: That really encouraged me to have some—like a color palette, if you will; a blank canvas to write songs from. There were these stories that I was telling, being these characters and musicals and stuff on stage. We grew up as kids doing musical theater in the local community. I loved it, but what I loved most about it was just the storytelling aspect of being on stage. When I really started to analyze that I was way more excited about figuring out how I could write and tell my own stories and that delved directly into songwriting. So these chords that you were showing me on guitar and that I was learning from Kenny Loggins books, you know—suddenly trying to figure out how to play these chords would turn into alternate ways of hearing things and using my limited vocabulary at the time of different guitar chords and piano chords to develop my own writing style. My earliest songs were written at fourteen about how I viewed my life and the world around me and my crushes on girls in my eighth grade math class. I did my very first CD in my bedroom. That's how everything got started for me.

BRAD 00:04:35: Nice. That is awesome. When did you start thinking that being—maybe being a professional musician was something that you could pursue and wanted to pursue?

DERIK 00:04:45: I was—let's see. So that inspired both—or, not inspired, but occupied—most of my high school experience was learning how to navigate this whole persona of wanting to be a singer-songwriter. There was obviously a lot of influence from musical theater and from jazz and from all of these different pieces of—of music inspiration that I was surrounded by. That was kind of a process in trying to find myself, and the thing that I kept coming back to was this—this love and this passion for wanting to write music and perform music, and I loved singing. It seemed like playing these different instruments, having my own voice as a singer, and as a writer, was the thing that was tying it all together. So that's what I wanted to pursue as far as considering college. At the time, being 17—I have a very close relationship with both of my siblings, my older sister and my younger brother. My sister, Riana, was at the University of Michigan at the time for musical theater. I knew that I didn't want to study musical theater, but I also knew that I didn't want to be away from her. At the time, I just don't think I was really honestly ready to be on my own and leave that feeling of home. So, that felt like a safe choice to say, Oh, I'll look at the University of Michigan and see what sort of programs they have, and found the Performing Arts Technology program, which included a lot of computer programming, sound design, recording arts, and, it felt like, If I'm going to study something and get a college degree in something, I want it to be something that's going to challenge me further than just vocal performance. So I applied, was accepted, did a minor in jazz studies as a singer and went to Michigan. It was the only school I applied to and—primarily because I think deep down I wasn't ready to let go of this idea of home and it felt like a safe choice to go be with my sister at Michigan.

So now I'm in my first—my first semester and realizing that part of the curriculum dictates that freshmen and sophomores need a certain amount of training in the lab first before you're doing any sort of classes in the recording studios. And when I toured the school and seeing all of these amazing recording facilities, I was so eager and so excited about, When can I get into those. Now getting there and being like, Wait—two years until I have to—go plug stuff in and record stuff and—? So that was—it just felt a little bit anticipatory in a way that I was—my eagerness overshadowed my willingness to be patient and learn the things that the curriculum dictated I learn. So it was an amazing first year. I took music theory, musicology, basic music classes, basic recording arts classes. But there was most of my time that was being spent behind a computer, programming music instead of onstage performing music or in a studio writing music. And that's where I really wanted to be. So, by the end of the first semester, I was really feeling this disconnect. Because I was also involved in a lot of jazz classes, I had the opportunity to study with the late great Geri Allen—*incredible pianist*. She really opened my eyes to improvisation and—especially coming in as a singer, young singers notoriously have a reputation for not being able to count, not knowing where one is, not real behavior changes (*Brad laughs*), all of which I was extremely guilty of (*laughs*). So, she really opened my eyes to improvisation

and, especially as a singer, that—something clicked in me where that was yet another layer that was added to my—my canvas.

My canvas just got even bigger for the kind of music that I wanted to play and write and be a part of. So I traveled with the jazz band to New York City for the IAJE conference back when that was in existence. Unfortunately, it's no longer but—the International Association for Jazz Education, I believe. That was yet another pivotal moment where it was my first time really in a—in a major city that wasn't Seattle. I was performing at open mics, and casuals, and jam sessions, and meeting talented musicians from all over the city and major guys that were in the jazz world. That really was—it lit a fire in me, and I came away from that weekend—long weekend with business cards and connections and ideas and motivation and this urgency and this momentum. I felt like, Wait a minute. My parents are generously helping pay for this education in Ann Arbor, Michigan, a small, wonderful little small town. I just went to New York for a weekend outside the confines of any sort of university setting and was able to rapid-fire make connections, build momentum towards a career. That really caused me to—I kind of shut down, to be honest with you. I shut down and was like, What am I doing with my life? I'm eighteen, I don't know if I did the right thing. I think I played it too safe by following my sister to college, and I'm in a program that I don't think is right for me. I think I need to do something different.

That was the scariest situation because I felt like I was letting my family down. I felt like I was letting my parents down who had just generously provided this opportunity for me to be in my first year of college. So, on my own, I was researching other universities and other programs in major cities that might be a better fit to be able to hit the ground running and not wait until I had graduated from college in order to start my career. I wanted to give it all I had and go all in on this dream of writing music, playing music, singer-songwriter guy, and not wait. So, that's what I did, and luckily my family and my friends and my instructors and teachers—they supported me in that. I transferred to the University of Southern California in Los Angeles, and, no disrespect to Michigan, other than football, of course (*laughs*), but it was the best decision I ever made and a decision that changed my life, and that was the pivotal—the pinnacle pivotal moment that I knew that I was going all in on this—on this dream.

BRAD 00:12:41: Nice. Then let me ask you this: what did you do, or what was your first experience where you were like, I think I'm making it—I've made it? I guess I'd say, what did you do or when did you feel like a professional musician?

[00:12:58-00:13:47: Zoom Connection Troubleshooting]

BRAD 00:13:48: The question is: what or when or what did you do that made you feel like, "I think I've made it I'm—I feel professional"? You know, there's always that—I guess, the level of like, Oh, this is working for me. My decisions have paid off and now I'm doing it. I got my theater gig, or I got my paycheck coming in, or what did you—What was that like for you?

DERIK 00:14:12: It's interesting. It's always a series of steps and I think no matter who you ask in the art or music community, when you ask the question of like, So when did you know that you were, like, successful? It's like—I am? (*laughs*) So, there was a lot of little moments along the way and us, being creative types and goal-oriented artists who always want to continue pushing ourselves and our boundaries of what we're capable of, that ceiling is always increasing. That's been a trend in my life, for sure, but I would say there was a moment during my collegiate career at USC, that I was seated at a table wearing a tuxedo next to Brian Wilson of the Beach Boys and Lamont Dozier—great, incredible songwriter. And I was about to be honored with the Brian Wilson songwriting scholarship. That was like a "Pinch me" moment, where I'm having—I'm having dinner with Brian Wilson and Lamont Dozier and talking about songwriting. To feel included by heroes of mine in my field in that way was like, Oh my god. I couldn't even believe it. So that gave me some validation that, Okay, maybe I—maybe I have the talent, maybe I have the tenacity, and now, do I have the creativity to figure out how to—not rely on how hard working and how talented I am, but how creative I can be, how flexible I can be, to be able to adapt and follow this path of—of independence towards combining helping others and doing the things that I want to do? How does that path—how does that converge?

BRAD 00:16:12: That's good—the "pinch me" moment, for sure. Sweet. Let me ask you this: what was the music scene like when you first started playing professionally? I mean, when you're like, Okay, I'm working I'm at work—what was the scene like or the environment in which you were participating in?

DERIK 00:16:30: Especially moving to moving to LA, we—I put a band together, and that was the first time I ever really played with a band. We started playing all over campus and built up some notoriety around the—the USC community. We were playing campus festivals and events and fairs and some of the major venues and stuff on campus. Then we gradually were able to bridge the gap out into LA and Hollywood. We played downtown. We played the Sunset Strip, sold out the Troubadour—that was like a major validating feather in our cap as far as being in college in a band, and you get to play the Troubadour, and people actually show up, and on top of that, there's a ton of people there! That's like—

BRAD 00:17:24: That's it, right? That's, like, I've made it.

DERIK 00:17:25: Yeah. Again, we're talking about "pinch me" moments that feel like what is your definition of success and making it and there were these—these little moments along the way that just fueled the fire and kept me inspired and—and objectively held me accountable towards continuing on this path. As far as what the music scene was, like—

BRAD 00:17:50: Was it competitive?

DERIK 00:17:51: It was very competitive, and especially these—these LA venues. I'll tell you an embarrassing story because we have to talk about the mistakes that we've learned along the way. My very first gig I ever played in Hollywood was at the Key Club, a famous venue on the Sunset Strip. I was working with a promoter that one of my classmates was doing an internship with. They had made an announcement "We're looking for artists who want to play this—this event we have some time slots to fill."

I was like, Oh my god, cool. I'd love to play the Key Club. That sounds great. So she—she got me the contract, got me the presale tickets and I had a stack of 100 presale tickets, 15 bucks each. And I was so excited. I'm like, Cool. Look at all these tickets. I started giving them away to my friends. I mailed some to my aunt and uncle in Palm Springs, gave them out to my teachers. I was so excited. Look at all these people that are going to come. My parents flew in. It's my first gig in Hollywood. Oh my god. So I get backstage, my dad's there with me. We're on the—in the green room looking at all the names written on the dressing room wall. I'm about to go on for my little 20 minute acoustic set at the Key Club, right? My name's on the marquee on the board. And the promoter comes in and says, "All right, you got 15 minutes and we need the—the payment." I said, "You need the payment? What do you mean?" "The presale money for the tickets." "What—what presale money?" "Didn't you get the presale tickets?" I said, "Yeah." "It's pay-to-play. We need the presale money."

And I—I just, my heart sank, my stomach turned, my face turned bright red. I looked at my dad and I said, "Yeah, give me just one second." I pulled my dad aside and we went out in the back alley and I was like, "Dad, I fucked up. I don't know how this happened, but I misinterpreted what this whole thing was. I thought these were comp tickets. And this is a—this is a new thing for me. These were pay-to-play. So I had to sell a certain number of presale tickets in order to appear on stage. And now I've got my aunt and uncle and my mom and my teachers in the audience that are all there waiting for me to go on. If I don't pay this promoter, I'm not going on stage." And he said, "Well, how much is the—is the minimum?" And I said, "\$750," and he just looked at me and smiled and grabbed his wallet. He said, "Well, I guess we better go find an ATM." So my dad bailed me out, pulled \$750 out of the ATM in cash. I handed it over the promoter and he said—my dad just gave me a hug and said, "Have a great show, bud."

I will never forget—obviously I will never forget that. But it taught me an important lesson about how the business side of live music, as it pertains to the bar/club/venue scene in a major city—how that works. And me, being from small town Olympia—that was something that I never really was exposed to. And so it was my own lesson learned, and a valuable one, because when it came time to meet the \$1,500 minimum to play an hour-long, headlining set at the Troubadour, you better believe our band hustled for every single one of those tickets to sell that place out, get an excited crowd of people there to support us, and, when it was all said and done, we made a little money. But it felt really weird handing over a Ziploc bag of cash to a dude who had really no interest beyond, "Where's the money?" as to what

we were doing there on stage. That piece of the business was like, We did it. And now I don't want to be part of this ever again.

BRAD 00:19:41: Did they give you a percentage? How did that work? Like, Okay, sell all these tickets—what number—what threshold did you have to hit before you started seeing the return on your investment?

DERIK 00:22:29: We could sell—I think we could sell the tickets for whatever we wanted, so we sold them for like twenty bucks. I think we had to meet—I think it was \$1,000. So we sold a hundred tickets to—to meet our—or fifty tickets, sorry, at twenty bucks. Then I think we ended up selling a total of—God, I want to say seventy or eighty tickets total. So we were all splitting—we all made a hundred bucks on it. (*laughs*)

BRAD 00:23:01: Minneapolis tried—I guess this is a little off track, but Minneapolis did the same thing. When he went to First Avenue, they'd give you a stack of tickets, but they would expect the ticket to come back and then whoever was holding the ticket had to pay for it. So you could give them out, but then they had to come back and the person had to pay the amount on the front of the ticket.

DERIK 00:23:19: Oh, wow.

BRAD 00:23:21: That was at least kind of cool because the band wasn't on the hook, but if they didn't see enough tickets come back—They'd give you like one freebie. Like, "Okay, here you go. Give out the tickets. If they come back and we get X amount back, then you get to come back and work again. But otherwise, not." So I got my one time and that was great (*laughs*).

DERIK 00:23:39: Yeah. I feel as musicians, it's—it's a rite of passage. But it also is—it exposes that there is so much of your time and effort that goes into hustling your friends down to get 'em a ticket, and get the cash, and get the, you know, and do all of the legwork that it takes to go on stage for forty-five minutes. It takes away from all of the time and effort that should be being channeled into the artistry.

BRAD 00:24:09: Yeah, well—this whole class that I'm doing this for, it's like—neoliberalism—it's a—it's a rich word when studying why this is all happening. We'll talk more about that at the end.

DERIK 00:24:20: So not only did I want to make a living, but I wanted to do something that could help people and that, to me, wasn't the best use of anybody's time. And it didn't feel great for us other than saying, We sold out the Troubadour. And for the rest of my life, I can say, "I've played at the Troubadour"

BRAD 00:24:38: (*laughs*) Sold out crowd, sold out crowd.

DERIK 00:24:40: Yeah, sold out crowd. Hustled my freakin' ass off and shook my friends down in order to make it happen.

BRAD 00:24:45: That's funny. What do you think the differences are between the music scene from the time that you started, to where the music scene was in January 2020?

DERIK 00:24:58: Oh boy.

BRAD 00:24:59: Any—any changes in that arc? Did pay-to-play go away, or did it change, or—better or worse?

DERIK 00:25:07: You know, I might be sort of an outlier in—in the pool of interviewees that you have, just strictly based on—I mean, we've talked about how the ceiling is never high enough for me. I'm always trying to figure out what the next move is, and what the next project is. Stagnancy and I don't really get along so well. And—

BRAD 00:25:33: That's good.

DERIK 00:25:34: As far as the music scene— Because I was so hell-bent on wanting—I don't know if it was because I had such a specific vision for the kind of life that I wanted, or career that I wanted, or that it was I wanted control over the vision of how the music sounded or what, but I always felt like I wasn't quite good enough to compete with the other guys who were doing session stuff and who were doing the once a week regular casuals. It was either that I was not available enough, not in town enough, or just didn't feel like I was in that world. I was like, jack of all trades, master of none. So—so as far as the traditional gigging, working music—musicians scene— With the exception of playing these venues on the strip, that was something that I never felt like I was totally invited to or included on. I'm not sure if that stems from being the frontman, or being the singer and having some of that—some of that reputation.

BRAD 00:26:53: Was your focus mostly on recording, or where—where was—where did your focus go then? Because it went from like, Well I'm trying to gig and do all this stuff. That's not really for me. So where does the focus become?

DERIK 00:27:06: I knew I wanted a bigger platform, and I knew I also wanted to figure out how to make a living doing music, and I love producing, I love writing my own stuff, and I wanted to help other artists do that. So I started my own recording studio just out of my apartment after college. That was my main thing until, that same year, I was picked up for an audition and was hired on the TV show *Glee*. That was another life-changing moment that exposed me to the entire film and TV industry, which is a

whole 'nother facet of the music business in itself. And—was very fortunate that, based on—I wasn't hired because I was the most talented. I was hired because I was honest, I was communicative with the casting director, and the biggest thing was, she hired me for the audition and was looking for a band. And so I brought all my buddies in my band with me, we showed up at the audition, and I sacrificed my own time slot to showcase the amazing, talented friends of mine. That stuck out in her mind, the camaraderie that I showed to—to show a team effort instead of a lot of the, unfortunately, very self-serving tendencies that a lot of actors and musicians in Los Angeles stereotypically have.

BRAD 00:28:43: You want to be in a band, it's about the band.

DERIK 00:28:45: Yeah, it's—it's about the people that are helping you, and I wanted to try to give them a platform as well. The coolest part of that story is, not only did it end up resulting in a full time job for over four seasons on *Glee* for me, but all of the guys in my band have now worked for her in some capacity, whether it's a recording session, or a live show, or a TV show. So, through that, I was now in a position where I had a full-time job, I was making great money playing guitar on a hit TV show, and networking with other cast members and crew and TV execs and now getting plugged into different shows and different events, doing stuff for the Grammy Foundation, singing backup vocals for Mary J Blige. You know, that just—and then a list of—getting hired by Disney, and then ABC, and then NBC, and then *Modern Family*, and all of these things that spurred from this connection.

BRAD 00:29:54: (*low whistle*)

DERIK 00:29:54: Yeah, exactly! And it was all just—it's—it seems like—I don't know how to explain it other than, like, natural growth. If you put yourself out there, if you are true to who you believe yourself to be, and stick to your morals and show up honestly and humbly to help the people that you're connected with, then I believe good things will happen.

BRAD 00:30:22: Oh, yeah, I agree with you. You are totally correct.

DERIK 00:30:26: Sorry, but your original question was compared to now.

BRAD 00:30:31: Well, that's okay. The questions are just kind of guides. But it's kind of kind of like—in the people I've been interviewing, some of them like, "Oh, when I started, there wasn't much work and blah, blah, blah." But I like, that was great, that's exactly what I needed to hear for that question. Well, let me ask you this: When you first—we'll talk about kind of present. We'll move it up to what's going on—when you first heard about, There's a sickness going around, it's this COVID-19 thing and oh, it's pretty bad and people are getting sick. What did you think at the very beginning stages of it when you heard, like most people did, Oh, there's this thing going around? Where were you and where did that kind of fit into your psyche?

DERIK 00:31:14: I was on the road, on tour with my family. We, a few years ago, started an acoustic sibling singing trio called Derik Nelson and Family, and developed a touring show for performing arts centers and educational outreach events. That has been our full-time job since 2016. We partnered with an agency, the largest booking agency in the country, and they have helped open some doors for us to be able to make our living touring all over the country, with our own show, to large performing arts centers. So we were on tour. February—end of February, and it was a— It was a small handful of dates, but when we first started in—again, in our efforts to try to do something different and creative, we built an entire video show around what we were doing on stage live so that we had these extra components of audio, video, prerecorded stuff that was then synced to our live performance. We could do six-part harmony with our clones on the screen, we could do a full band, a full orchestra behind us that flies through space—it just opened up the ability to really create a compelling and engaging experience for the audience, and gave us a lot of control to be—to go into any venue in the country and be able to plug into the wall and set our stuff up and know that it's going to work, it's going to fit, and it's going to be the same show. And we don't have to worry about the limitations of backline and house gear and it allowed the associations and presenters booking us to save a lot on not having to also hire the lighting guy, the sound technician, all of the equipment and backline and crew necessary to do a show like ours. So it was just—it was right in the sweet spot of, like, the right price for presenters who wanted to book us with the least amount of red tape to be able to come in, set our stuff up and do it.

BRAD 00:33:34: That's awesome.

DERIK 00:33:34: What backfired on me was I bought a trailer, we put all of this stuff in it, and now we're committed to driving to any location around the country that wants to book us, which is fine in the context of a larger tour with dates that are spaced out accordingly so that

BRAD 00:33:40: In a line (*laughs*)

DERIK 00:33:48: Exactly— But when you get your first date in North Carolina, and then Iowa, and then Indiana, and then Wisconsin, and they're all great paying gigs and they're coming to you a year and a half out saying, "A year and a half from now we'd like you to do your full show for an amazing price in North Carolina. What do you say?" Brad, you say hell yes.

BRAD 00:34:22: I'll be there!

DERIK 00:34:23: Exactly.

BRAD 00:34:24: Hire a driver to drive that trailer across—

DERIK 00:34:26: Well, that's the thing. So the amount of upfront money that you have to invest to get the trailer out to North Carolina, on time, battling—accounting for inclement weather, snow—I mean, we've seen all of it; flat tires, busted leaf springs, axles breaking on the trailer. We've—we've shed not only the music, but trailer guy stuff as well. It's been a huge learning curve in itself, but, in this situation, this past tour a few months ago was a handful of dates that, in committing to them, put some—how do I put this as respectfully as possible?—brought about some difficulty just in the fact that we had to haul the trailer all the way to the east coast and back. So we were in North Carolina when all of this stuff started happening about—we're hearing about this virus, and it started in China, and now there's some cases here, and it's no big deal, it's like the flu, and, and we didn't really think anything of it.

BRAD 00:35:46: When they're like, It's only old people or—

DERIK 00:35:48: Yeah, It's just old people. So there was some concern already in North Carolina and we made the decision day-of to—obviously continue with the show, and we made an announcement that out of respect for everyone's health, we won't be in the lobby shaking hands, we'll just wave to everybody from the edge of the stage tonight. We always like to go out to the merch table and thank the very people who are putting money in our pockets by supporting us there. That's one of our favorite parts of being on the road is meeting the people that are coming to see you, right? So, we made that announcement, and it almost felt, at the time, like, political. Even addressing it was like you had a political stance because people would be offended by the fact that you would say, “Out of respect for everyone's health, we're not going to be shaking hands.”

It felt weird already. And, then, by the next show, we were in Iowa, and we had heard conflicting things from the presenters that were still upcoming on our route. And we have all of these contracts and agreements in place that are a year and a half out already. We were in Iowa—loading in to do our show in Iowa, and the next day is supposed to be Indiana—we were supposed to drive to Indiana—and first they said it was all good, they're gonna continue, and they have hand sanitizer and everything, and then they called an hour later and they canceled and that was the first time that we were like, Oh shit this is real.

BRAD 00:37:34: Oh it—oh it's—it's serious!

DERIK 00:37:40: I haven't told anybody this and I don't know how—if and how you want to use this—if this would be appropriate to include, but I'll just share with you and let you make that call. They honored our agreement because we had explained we had driven the trailer all the way out here, the money had been spent. It's—we—we paid for gas and food and a place to park and sleep and a hotel to stay in that was at least mid-range enough to have a security camera of the parking lot. Our entire livelihood was in this trailer and in this car and this is, you know, it's here. It's in Indiana, ready to go, and you're saying we can't do the show. While we understand the reason, like—(pauses)(laughs)

BRAD 00:38:25: Yeah, I've had that happen.

DERIK 00:38:27: That was our argument and it didn't—they barely pushed back, Brad, which was amazing. I mean, so incredible, so gracious. They said, "Well, I don't know what's gonna happen, but we're mailing the check right now and the school board, if they're upset about it, then, you know, (shrugs) cash the check."

BRAD 00:38:41: Well, I look at it as—they look at it as, it's money that they already spent, really.

DERIK 00:38:45: Yeah, yeah. So that was almost a little tough, because I was just then hearing from a lot of my friends in music that their gigs were getting canceled, and they were out all of this money, and here I am being like, Oh, we were able to complete almost our whole tour and the shows that we didn't do, we actually ended up getting paid for anyway. (*laughs*)

BRAD 00:39:11: The power of a contract, you know.

DERIK 00:39:13: Yeah, and with it—obviously this is a an unprecedented—as the buzzword became—an unprecedented situation and to still feel supported by the association that was hiring us was a really big thing and that sticks with me. Obviously I want to—I want to continue that generosity of trying to help as many people as possible and pay it forward. So we—we put my mom, who does our merchandise—she's our merch mom. (*laughs*) She sells all our merch at the shows in the lobby—we put her and Riana, our sister and tour manager—put them on a plane, found a flight out of Kansas City, redirected our route. There was snow in Montana and all through the mountains so [my brother] Dalton and I towed the trailer all the way down through California and up by I-5, and got over the California to Oregon border the same day that the governor shut down the state of California and closed the—closed the border. Literally made it home—I hate to say just in time, but just in time. Through that, we also had the unfortunate circumstance of—a week later, we were scheduled to go to Africa for just under a month as cultural ambassadors for the United States, traveling through the State Department. We were headed to Egypt and Eritrea, and both—all programming was suspended and postponed, because they couldn't guarantee that we wouldn't be quarantined upon arrival. That was tough because, again, we had already gotten all the vaccines, and the shots, and the paperwork, and everything. We were ready to go—ready and willing. So they have—also—they have honored our contract for that, as well, in hopes that we can still reschedule it. That's fantastic. Again, yeah—another reason why I felt a little bit guilty at the time, because there's so many other people out there that are doing creative things or—or even just in day-to-day jobs. My fiancé works at a hospital and—you get shut down, and you're—you're out. So to still feel like—

BRAD 00:41:55: And you're wondering, for how long? I remember it started to be like, Oh, well, maybe this will only be a month or two...or three or— mean, this is three month's worth right here. It's the only way I can keep track of time because I'm living Groundhog's Day here. So—

DERIK 00:42:12: Totally. I just got my hair done yesterday for the first time, Brad. Wanted to look good for you. That was my first time venturing out, really, into public with the mask on and—and all of that and it's—it's a little bit eerie. We, as humans—we have to find ways to—to adapt and change and I don't think it's ever gonna go quote unquote "back to normal." My fiancé has still not—has still not returned to work. She doesn't know when she'll be able to. She has an autoimmune disease and we ended up postponing our wedding an entire year because of this. It created a lot of emotional unknowns for us, just in the fact that I came home and we spent the full two weeks quarantined from each other. And my—the rest of my family even hasn't come over just because I'm—I want to be as respectful and aware of her health situation. There's just—there's new information coming out every day and it's hard to know really how to—how to move forward and what the boundary is. So that's been a struggle in itself.

BRAD 00:43:32: I hear ya. Geez. So while I had questions like, How did you prepare to be at home when they were like, Oh, everything's—you're on the lockdown? I personally was lucky that I had already had the digital camera and I had some studio mics and gear. Was there anything that you had to do other than stock up on toilet paper? (*laughs*)

DERIK 00:43:53: That's the interesting thing, Brad, is I've had a much different perspective of the—the start of this whole pandemic because we were on the road. We were traveling through Oklahoma, the middle of nowhere in Texas—tiny ass little cow town, and we stopped by a Walmart. Sure enough, no toilet paper. (*Brad laughs*) Pandamonium. I was—I was thinking about my fiancé wanting to make sure that I could get a few things on my way home, because she was—she didn't want to go out to the grocery stores and all of that. I'm like, Well, I'll see her in a week here. So we started stopping at Walmarts along the way thinking we're in small little towns on this route. And sure enough, it really—it hit everybody.

BRAD 00:44:45: Yeah.

DERIK 00:44:46: So yeah, I didn't have a—I didn't have a webcam. I did a whole bunch of research into audio/video stuff for streaming and figured out ways to use a DSLR camera, which is what I'm using here. I don't know how good the feed is based on the connection—but, figured out ways to use that as a webcam source because that's what I did have available to me. Every single webcam was sold out everywhere. I really was able to—actually—it seems so ironic, but I created more connections with other people, other musicians during the past ten to twelve weeks than I have in years. I think that has been the biggest silver lining of this whole process is the connections that have been able to—the

connections that have been made in everyone's effort to adapt and find creative ways to move forward. It's given all of us, I think, a little bit of a permission slip to be like, Okay, well, I'm trying this now.

BRAD 00:46:06: Yeah, absolutely.

DERIK 00:46:07: Check it out, or not, and I might be doing something different tomorrow.

BRAD 00:46:11: Well, that's a good question. What have you—what kind of work are you engaging in now that we're mostly on the internet? What kind of projects do you have going right now? Or do you have any projects that you're—?

DERIK 00:46:25: One of the things I first started doing was—it ended up being called music meditation. It was born out of just one night on Instagram Live—that's something I like to do most nights just to get my—as an outlet; as a musical therapy outlet is like piano noodling. Just different chords, little melodic lines and beautiful, soft, calming, just piano improvisations. And it's not something I usually share with anyone because it's—when you're in just the improvisational, vulnerable state of creation, that can be just a personal place. It's not always something that you feel like, I'm performing. So I decided just to turn my phone on and share with people online, on Instagram Live, just some of my piano musings. One of the—one of the participants tuning in was a contact of mine at the State Department that was putting together a podcast about connecting through isolation. They ended up using the musical piece that I had done for their flagship podcast, and the next night, I got all of these messages and complaints from people. "Where are you? Where's music meditation?" I had never said, I'm doing this every night. And now suddenly these people are like, "I really needed this. Where is it?"

So that was the only night I missed and then the following night, for fifty-three consecutive nights in a row, every night at eight o'clock 'til about 8:15 pm, I'd jump on and connect with the chat, say hi to a—a strong, dedicated yet small group of about fifteen to twenty people that regularly tuned in every night, do some sort of theme and an improvisation built around whatever that theme was. It was a really cool way to connect people from all over the world. I got messages on a regular basis, saying, "This really helped me, I was so anxious today and this really calmed me down," or, "I was crying today and I couldn't look—I was looking forward to this all day. I thought about my grandmother and I closed my eyes and I was at my grandmother's house through your music."

Just these incredible complimentary things of a small way that doesn't take very much for me to be able to show up and serve these people at a time when music can be used medicinally. That was something I did. Another project—I was able to help an organization—a theater or organization in Athens, Tennessee, who hosted an online festival that I was part of. I have signed on to do some remote recording projects for some different artists and bands. And I connected with a roster of over 150 musicians through a project called Stuck At Home Records, which combined, each week, a new roster

of four musicians from all over the world to write and record, via Instagram, an original piece of music that everyone contributed to. It was just a way to use this time constructively and collaborate with other musicians and I had the privilege of being in virtual bands week after week with amazing musicians from all over the country. The horn player and keyboardist from Snarky Puppy, the drummer for some of the major Broadway shows that now have been—have gone dark, the drummer for Frankie Valli and the Four Seasons. Incredible players that have a long, long list of—of credentials and feathers in their caps. That was an incredible process. Just the collaborative piece of connection through this time has been one of the biggest gifts I think, and recently, sorry—I just—I feel like I'm just rambling here,

BRAD 00:50:51: You're actually answering a lot of the questions that I was going to be asking, anyway. So it's all good. (*laughs*)

DERIK 00:50:56: Last thing I want to tell you about, because I'm really excited about it as far as what projects are you focused on right now—I started an online songwriting group called The Writing Tank. It's a way for me to share some of the songwriting strategies that I've developed that have helped land me songs in news and movies, TV commercials, and built a career to be able to perform all over the world. So The Writing Tank—it's now seventy-nine members strong and we've only had three live sessions. But every week I show up live and we—we've written a song all together about finding the silver lining during quarantine, and it's called “Dancing in the Living Room.” So now we're making a music video, and not only have different musicians from all over the world contributed to create the track for it, but I'm getting video submissions from people all around the world: different ages, races, walks of life, to send little clips—video clips of them dancing to the song in their living room. That's what I'm going to use to compile the final music video, to show how connected we really are. And to represent the positivity and the—the unity of using this time creatively and collaboratively to create something fun, something that is focused on the positive effects of all of this, which has been connection.

BRAD 00:52:27: That's fantastic. That sounds awesome, man.

DERIK 00:52:30: Thank you.

BRAD 00:52:32: So let me ask you this: Once the switch is thrown and—it was really easy to shut the switch off and shut everything down. Once they crank the switch back on, how do you think the things that we're doing now during COVID are going to, perhaps, change your future trajectory for what it is you thought you were going to be doing?

DERIK 00:52:54: That's a good question. As—as much as the switch was flipped, I think the—I don't know if the switch can be turned back on. I think it's gonna be a gradual rethreading of the wire; a hamster on a wheel that—that, you know—that's just proven by the fact that all of my gigs for the

remainder of 2020 and even into February 2021 have been postponed or canceled. Which is tough. I mean, it ranges anywhere from small local outdoor gigs supporting my hometown to national tour situations. Even this—this assignment with the—with the State Department. We don't know the specifics around when it will be okay. I think the unknown is the hardest part and it's put our entire business model on hold and caused our family to have a necessary constructive productive conversation about shifting gears and using this time to figure out how we can individually move forward with the things that we're really passionate about that can also be things that can help others. Songwriting, and teaching, and producing has always been one of my passions and has been something I've kind of put on the back-burner over the past few years, with so much focus on touring. Now it's allowed me the time to build the foundation for an online program where songwriters from all over the world can come together and collaborate and—and create.

That's something that I feel like could not only be a—an amazing outlet for others, but could be a growing business model for me. My sister has moved into this space as a—as a coach. She's doing big sis coaching and helping young women around the world build their self-confidence and—and she's amazing at it. She's written a book during this time. She just finished her first draft—60,000 words. My brother Dalton has gone totally into woodworking and using his hands to create things and—and it's given us an opportunity to take some space from the whole Derik Nelson and Family project to get back in touch with the things that we're individually passionate about so that we can figure out how we can best show up and serve the world when this whole thing—you know, when the hamster starts running.

BRAD 00:56:00: Just in time for the next car comes over.

DERIK 00:56:02: Yeah, and it might mean that the touring chapter is over, and that has been—that's taken a little while to come to terms with. I think we've all kind of gone through our various stages of grief with that, but I think that's the biggest lesson that life can teach us is how we adapt to change. And that's not something I'm good at. So I'm grateful, and I'm trying to reframe my mind into—into finding the gratitude in using this whole opportunity to explore change. So far it's—it's been an opportunity for me to connect with—with people that I normally wouldn't. I just worked on a song with a sax player in Poland and a flugel player in England, and got a video submitted from a kid in Brazil, and a twelve year old shredding guitar player down in California, and the fact that that is able to be facilitated through all of this—I don't know if that sense of urgency and that respect for connection would have been possible six months ago.

BRAD 00:57:15: I agree. It's interesting. When you talk about that I think of the artist Peter Gabriel. His whole thing was they had a castle and he would go around the world and had to bring people to him, to his castle to be able to record and would host a—a month-long quorum of musicians getting together. But now that we have the internet, and everybody's been locked down, and, like, I got to do something. That's great that you're on the front—front side of that tip. Sweet.

DERIK 00:57:45: Thank you.

BRAD 00:57:45: I got one more question. Let's kind of wrap it up, I guess. I look at this as your message for the future, if you will. So maybe a twofold message. I'll ask for the first one: if you were able to give a sentence or two of advice, something that you would really sum up as what a future musician looking back at this time could really learn from you or from this particular situation, what do you think that would be?

DERIK 00:58:17: It's a great question, and bold of you, knowing how long winded I've been (*laughs*).

BRAD 00:58:24: That's why I did this one first. After this, I'll just ask if you have anything that, you know, future— Because this particular record is something that hopefully people will look back and see, but I think there's a—I can't remember his name off the top of my head, but there's a famous interviewer who was like, "If in the future, 150 years from now, there's only one sentence or two sentences that they can hear from Derik Nelson—what do you think?"

DERIK 00:58:51: I'm racking my brain trying to think of some profound way to say it, but—

BRAD 00:58:56: You can go over one or two sentences. (*laughs*)

DERIK 00:59:05: (*laughs*)(long pause) Sometimes—sometimes these things are necessary—necessary in order to elicit creativity. A lot of times in our lives we think, You know what, we'll always have time. This just goes to show that—that things will never stay the same enough to—to do the things that you're really passionate about. So, this has been a luxury of forcing us inward, forcing us to really reckon with the things that we believe in, the music we want to make, the kind of art that we want to put out in the world, and the kind of people that we want to be. And that's—that has had a spotlight shone on it. As far as what I can tell future musicians—Don't be afraid to take chances. It seems so simple, but this—this whole period of quarantine has, like I said earlier, it's been a permission slip for us to—to try new things and to explore the boundaries of our own artistry. And in that you'll—you'll learn stuff about yourself that you—you didn't know before. I guess, being grateful for the opportunity to change and the opportunity to grow.

BRAD 01:00:41: Nice. That is sage advice.

DERIK 01:00:45: I always like to try to reframe things and find the positive. Otherwise it just is a—a dark, spiraling rabbit hole of shit.

BRAD 01:00:53: Yeah, you got that one right. Well, cool. Well, I'll tell you what, I want to say that we've been talking with Derik Nelson in Olympia, Washington about his career and I want to say thank you very much for sharing with us. Can I get your permission to use this recording that we've done today?

DERIK 01:01:12: Yes, absolutely. Edit in a way that makes me sound smart, and—and respectful [half-joking].

BRAD 01:01:21: Nice. I'm going to gray your hair as the interview goes on.

DERIK 01:01:25: Thank you. (*Brad laughs*) Perfect. Again, this is my personal account, and it's as—as honest and as—I guess I'll say vulnerable as I can be about the whole experience. I want to thank you, Brad, for facilitating a forum where we can talk about some of this stuff, because to recount it from start to finish like this, I haven't done yet. It's been able to open my eyes to how much we have grown through it, and how much change there has been made around it. And I'm hoping that—that it doesn't take a global pandemic for people to force themselves to be uncomfortable and put themselves in uncomfortable positions in order to promote kindness, compassion, creativity and growth. That's a much better soundbite.

BRAD 01:02:21: Your interview will help with that.